

# At home with Nero

Caroline Vout

## Great expectations

1999 marked the reopening in Rome of two of its major attractions, the Villa Borghese with its collection of artworks ancient and modern, and the Domus Aurea or Golden House of Nero. Such is the demand for these attractions that visitors are asked to pre-book their tickets. The waiting exacerbates the anticipation of entering the Domus Aurea, the most notorious ancient palace in Rome.

The entrance is not easy to find, nor the Esquiline Hill which it graces particularly pleasant. There is at least a token gesture to the masses with the provision of toilets and a stall selling guidebooks, but the door to Nero's pleasure dome looks suspiciously like a hole in the ground. The tour starts with a slow descent into darkness as the chosen few snake their way into the bowels of the hillside. It is dank and disorientating. Only a few of its rooms and corridors are accessible. Its decoration has long since crumbled.

## Like a phoenix from the flames... and into a dungeon

In 64 C.E. Rome was gutted by fire. The solid brick and marble structures that we study today were only part of the picture. Much of the city was packed with wooden housing and went up like tinder. The most controversial result (and indeed the cause of rumours claiming that he had lit the match) was that Nero now had a canvas on which to build his 'Golden House'. And build he did – the grounds of his palace embraced the Palatine and Caelian hills as well as the Esquiline. His plans were so ambitious that it was still unfinished when he died.

After his death in 68 and the ensuing civil war, Nero's successors, Vespasian and Titus continued to live in part of the palace, though they were not keen to display this decision to the people. Nero had died hated by the upper orders: it was in his followers' interests to distance themselves from him. Thus they built the Colosseum in its gardens so as ostentatiously to liberate its land. As time ticked by more of the palace was 'made public': Vespasian, for example, had already opened its vestibule, freeing the giant statue of Nero from inside it and dedicating it to the Sun. But the most symbolic act of repossession would come in 104, when Trajan saw a second fire as an excuse to modify the section on the Esquiline in what was now a standard way of showing generosity towards one's subjects and competing with one's predecessors (a question of which emperor could hit Nero the hardest). Trajan did wonderfully, putting a public bathhouse on top of Nero's pavilion – an act which demanded that it be filled up with earth – reduced from representing the height of city-living to being a mere supporting structure. This decision ironically preserved the palace for posterity but made it the dungeon we visit today.

## Creating a world in miniature

A 'dungeon' is a fitting memorial to one of Rome's worst emperors. But what did the palace look like in the 60s? One way of answering this is to turn to the ancient literature, although the majority of this was written after Nero's death and formed part of the tradition that already cast Nero as a tyrant. It is not clear whether the grounds of the house were open to the public under Nero. The sources do not suggest that this – but then they

conspire to make the Golden House stand for his greed and egotism: everything about it from its exaggerated scale to the intricacy of its detail screams conspicuous consumption. According to Tacitus, the key conspirator in Nero's death, Piso, referred to it as 'that hated palace which Nero had plundered from his people', while Suetonius records the popular verses: 'Rome is now a single house: try moving to Veii, citizens, if this house doesn't soon also occupy Veii!'

Suetonius' de-scription is the fullest. He writes:

*The following details will convey its size and magnificence. A colossal statue of Nero, 120 feet in height, stood in the vestibule of the house. Its width was such as to include three mile-long porticoes and a lake which resembled the sea, surrounded by buildings which resembled cities. All around were villas with fields, vineyards and pastures, woods with every type of domestic and wild animal. In other parts of the palace, structures were overlaid with gold and studded with gems and shells. The dining rooms had ceilings of ivory, the panels of which were mobile and perforated so that flowers and perfume could be showered upon the guests. The main dining room was circular and revolved continuously day and night, like the earth. The baths were supplied with sea-water and sulphurous water. When it was completed, Nero inaugurated the house, and he showed his satisfaction by remarking that finally he could begin to live like a human being.*

How are we to read this passage? In Suetonius' eyes, Nero's house has overtaken Rome to literally become a (the) city. More than a city, a mini-world complete with seas (with real sea-water no less) and woodland. Animals which we would expect to see controlled in an amphitheatre are here described wandering around. The main dining-room meanwhile is said to revolve: something which the sophistication of Roman engineering makes believable – even if no evidence has been found within the ruins. Until it is found, I prefer to see the revolving dining-room as part of a metaphor which casts Nero at the centre of his own self-created world.

## Rediscovery

Trajan's decision to bury the Golden House worked better than he could have imagined. It was lost (!), only to be rediscovered in the fifteenth century. Was it under St. Peter's? This is what most visitors were told (presumably a statement about Christian victory over persecution). But by the early sixteenth century the artistic wonders he preserved were having a direct effect on the decoration of the Vatican palaces or Loggie. The intricate beauty of Nero's wall-paintings (called 'grotesque' after the now-subterranean 'grottoes' which housed them) spawned a style of its own. Not only paintings but also sculptures came to the surface. The most famous of these is the Laocoon which was said in the seventeenth century to have been found in the Room of Hector and Andromache, so-called after its fresco of Hector saying farewell to his wife as he goes off to battle. Its discovery demands another article: it was probably not owned by Nero at all. What is certain though is that the Golden House was full of sculpture and its owner an enthusiastic collector, going as far as to carry a statue of an Amazon 'remarkable for the beauty of its legs' with him wherever he went, so says Pliny in his *Natural*

*History.* Pliny goes on to describe how the most celebrated of the pieces representing the Attalids against the Gauls were brought to Rome and arranged in his sitting-rooms.

Nero's Golden House was a box of delights, its now bricked up windows affording wonderful views of the gardens and city. As Tacitus says, what was magical about the Golden House was 'not so much the precious stones and gold.... but rather the cultivated fields and lakes with woods on one side – arising in wide deserted places and open spaces – and vast panoramas on the other'. Water-features and shining marble combined with the light to produce an effect that 'appeared to be golden', in Seneca's view. It is hard to recreate this vision today. But traces of paintwork and stucco are just visible in the darkness, their subtle colours and lightness of touch defying the resounding reputation of their emperor; until we remember that creativity and tyranny went hand in hand: that the fire of 64 was an act of creation. When the game is up and Nero's life is threatened, he sighs 'what an artist the world is losing!' As Renaissance artists visited his palace, they carved their names in its walls, again wielding this double-edged sword of creativity and destruction.

*Caroline Vout teaches Ancient Art and Culture and Latin at Nottingham University. She is currently finishing work on a book entitled Power and Eroticism in Imperial Rome.*